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ABSTRACT

This paper illustrates the usefulness of five principles of interpersonal communication in identifying ineffective teacher responses to student writing and in improving those responses. The principles described are that successful communicators (1) convey positive regard for the other person, (2) show empathic understanding for the ideas and feelings of the other person, (3) acknowledge openly their own ideas and feelings, (4) actively involve the other person in the communication act, and (5) strive for positive rather than negative evaluation when evaluation is required. The paper notes that the major causes of ineffective teacher response are failures on the part of teachers to acknowledge what a writer conveyed, to involve the writer in advice given for revision, and to acknowledge directly the reasons for their own reactions. Examples of teacher responses and improved versions of those responses make up the major portion of the paper. (AEA)

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Toward More Effective Teacher Response to Student Writing

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Writers need readers. After the solitude of composing, readers' responses help confirm the enterprise, revealing to writers how others experienced their words, suggesting where clarification may be needed, and motivating writers to keep writing. In writing classes, students are often willing readers of each others' writing, and yet, of course, they look to teachers for responses. Interestingly enough, whether or not papers are graded, many students read our end comments first, probably because they summarize a key response to their writing and create a context in which marginal comments make sense. Unfortunately, our final responses are not always as effectively written as they could be, perhaps because we feel we've already "said it all" in marginal comments, or because having read a paper, we are conscious of the papers remaining. Over the past few years I have been interested in interpersonal communication theory, and at the close of the past semester I reread my end responses contained in 75 student folders, each composed of a dozen papers written over the semester, in an attempt to learn how successfully the comments communicated in light of interpersonal theory. There were some surprises. In this article I would like to illustrate the usefulness of five principles of interpersonal communication in identifying ineffective end responses and improving them.

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The application of interpersonal communication theory to our responses is a natural one. Writing has often been described as someone saying something to someone else. Joseph Conrad, for example, writes, "My task . . . is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel - it is, before all, to make you see."[1] It stands to reason that a teacher should respond as someone who has (or has not) heard, felt, or seen. Whether or not a teacher is the main audience, he or she is always an audience. In theory, no two teachers' responses might ever be identical because of variables such as the personalities of the writer and teacher, their relationship, the aim and audience of a paper, and its stage of development. Thus, we might respond more or less critically to a draft written by a first semester freshman than a draft written by a skilled senior, and we might respond differently to the same student at different times of the semester and on assignments as varied as personal journals and formal reports. In the midst of these variables there is at least one constant: someone is communicating to someone else, and one person is responding to another. This is the setting for interpersonal communication.

I have selected the following five principles from among those readily applicable to teacher response. They do not dictate a style, but invite individual application. According to communication theorists, chances for successful communication increase when communicators:[2]

(1) Convey positive regard for the other This regard is similar to the attitude Young, Becker and Pike recommend to writers in Rhetoric: Discovery and Change: "The reader is addressed as if he were intelligent, curious, honest, sincere - in short, as if he possessed the same qualities that the writer attributes to himself."[3]

(2) Show empathic understanding for the ideas and feelings of the other Such understanding includes both identifying with another and conveying what was communicated. Recognition of feeling is especially important here, and Barbour and Goldberg note, "There is a general tendency in our culture to deny or minimize the importance of feelings and to stress logic and ideas. Ideas and the ability to deal with them in a systematic way are extremely important in interpersonal communication. However, problems often occur in an interpersonal situation because of a refusal to acknowledge and adequately deal with feelings."[4]

(3) Acknowledge openly their own ideas and feelings Synonyms are authenticity and self-disclosure. Honesty, when combined with tactfulness, helps a receiver accept communication because the basis for it is made evident to him. And the communicator experiences a sense of satisfaction in admitting his point of view.

(4) Involve actively the other in the communication act The reason is simple: "Communication acts which require overt use of message information will be more likely to be accepted and remembered by the receiver."[5]

(5) Strive for positive rather than negative evaluation when evaluation is required Some, Carl Rogers among them, say all evaluation harms interpersonal communication. Others say not all evaluation is harmful, and according to Barbour and Goldberg, evaluation when positive, increases communication effectiveness and acceptance.[6]

When I reread my end comments, aware of these principles and mindful that students often read end comments before they read other responses and notations, I was more able to identify their ineffectiveness and to realize how I could have improved them. My shortcomings, some of which may be those of other composition teachers, occur side-by-side with comments that appear effective. Ineffectiveness resulted from momentarily ignoring the developing writer and concentrating solely on form and ideas. More specifically, the major causes of ineffectiveness were failures to acknowledge what a writer conveyed, to involve the writer in advice given for revision, and to acknowledge directly the reasons for

my reactions.

Failure to acknowledge immediately what a writer had written took a variety of forms. Sometimes I responded to only part of what the writer had said. In a paper about the dangers of government control:

> The problems raised in the second to last paragraph are not resolved in the final paragraph.

If I had observed the principles, a better response would have been:

> I understand your concern about excessive government control and your anger is clearly communicated, but I'm troubled by the problems raised in your second to last paragraph that have no resolution in the close.

Sometimes I began by commenting on form, as in this comment from a paper on women's right to abortion:

> The essay does not build to its most important point.

BETTER: Your concern that every woman have a right to terminate her pregnancy is clearly expressed at the outset and close of the essay, but had you considered increasing reader interest by building to the key reason for your belief rather than starting with it?

In these comments and others I began by evaluating rather than acknowledging what was written. When the evaluation is negative, writers are immediately put on the defensive and some may not continue reading. Consider this evaluative response to a paper in protest to a tuition increase:

> Too many assumptions are made in this paper. I can't follow your reasoning because of them.

There's little in the comment to encourage writers to read further or to re-examine their assumptions and revise.

BETTER: I can tell you feel strongly about the tuition increase next semester and my natural inclination is to agree with you. However, since the administra-

> tion is your intended audience, I recommend you consider their position and then examine your assumptions. Aren't some of them going to need elaboration and justification before the administration can see your point of view?

Even positive evaluation, when used solely, can be unproductive. For example, consider the two expressions I used on a paper about jogging:

Excellent Good in all respects

After spending considerable time thinking about and writing a paper, a student may feel cheated: did the instructor read the paper carefully? Could <u>every</u> aspect of the paper really have been equally successful? Unless writer and teacher have discussed the paper and its ideas outside of class, the comments' sincerity might be questioned.

BETTER: Your defense of running as a form of exercise got me to consider taking up the activity myself. I was particularly influenced by the ethical appeal of the paper: your own detailed experienced, especially that sizeable loss of weight, speaks to me. I was equally impressed by the style of the paper.

Further analysis indicated that I told writers what to revise without direct conveyance of my reasons, almost as if I assumed the paper were mine to alter, and the writer, my amanuensis. At the end of a paper which emphasized the advantages of an aprtment over dormitory space I wrote:

> Give the opposition's views more attention, especially the advantages a dorm provides in convenience of location and food availability.

Why did I feel this tact was needed?

BETTER: I understand the reasons you favor an apartment over the dormitory, but I don't feel moved to accept them, perhaps as a result of spending last summer in a dormitory with my family while I attended an institute for teachers. Had you considered acknowledging to readers like me some of the advantages of dorm living like

> convenience of meals, closeness to classes and libraries, and near maintenance-free upkeep? Or, what if you strengthened your discussion of the advantages of apartments so the dorm's advantages don't enter readers' minds so readily?

My original comment might intimidate writers into revising, but it does little to motivate individuals to explore options and choose on their own what seems best. Consider another example of mine written at the end of a paper in which sex education classes were recommended for high school students:

> This is a theoretical and abstract discussion. Give some specific examples of what a sex education class would consist of.

BETTER: Your addressing parents as people who want only the best for their children strikes me as an effective way of establishing credibility at the outset of the essay. Wouldn't you need to maintain this relationship by further techniques, however? For example, you might describe in some detail the content of a successful sex education class. Or you might contrast the attitudes of adolescents who have had such a course to those who have not. Or, you might refer to your own experience as a result of having had such a course.

This technique could be illustrated through many responses, but the basic theory is the same: options are identified for writers to consider. A single alternate is not selected for them.

While the previous responses may help in defining individual principles, responses need to be seen in a more thoroughly defined and specific context to illustrate some of the dynamics of their application. I conclude by citing two student papers and their end responses. While each is a persuasive essay, there are major differences between them. The first paper was written early in a Freshman English course by a student just graduated from high school, accepted at college on the condition she enroll in special summer courses to improve her skills

and prove herself for regular admission in the fall. The second was written in Freshman English halfway through the fall semester by a sophomore who had received an incomplete grade the previous year for poor attendance and was repeating the course. The responses differ, but are appropriate to the situation, and I believe, observe the principles' spirit.

1

> Predudis is bad. It makes bad feelings and hatred and you see it everywhere. In famlys, citys schools church goverment etc. so many people have predudis.
>
> Take for example my family when my father remarried I hated his new wife. She bossed me around and wouldnt let me get away with anything. Then the accident happend and she came each day to the hospitel making me feel guilty. I saw I was predudis.
>
> Another example is the cops here are predudis, they find out your a student and they tail you. you park and go in Peggies for a beer and bouncers check your id two times. Even the teachers here are predudis against the students.
>
> Read the paper and you see one religion fights another one country hates anothers guts. War is bad is on tv all the time you turn it of and it doesnt go away. people are weird.

The essay is flawed mechanically, but even more serious is its lack of focus. The writer has made an attempt to connect her experience and an abstraction, and it is on this strength that she could build a second draft. I noted mechanical error in the margins, pointing out patterns of error and places in which error confused meaning, and responded as follows:

> I hear you conern, and I respect your admitting to a prejudice. Your experience in the hospital, I see, suggests a way of dealing with prejudice: withhold judgment until you've had adequate time to judge. Had you considered making that the focus of your essay and elaborating on your accident to illustrate?
>
> I'm bothered by the sweeping statements you make in turning from your stepmother to the cops to bouncers, teachers, religions, and war. I'd like to hear your views about any one of them in more detail. If you don't wish to focus on yourself, perhaps you could apply the idea of

withholding judgment to other areas of prejudice (i.e.,"If the local police would withhold judgment, there might be less prejudice towards_____"). Or, if you believe prejudice can't be dealt with so easily, consider:"Students aren't treated fairly at this school because _____." Or, "Prejudice is part of being human, and religions will always be prejudiced, in particular."

One of the strengths here is the connection of experience and an abstraction like prejudice. As preparation for your revision, I'd like you to describe in your journal the accident and what happened in the hospital when your stepmother visited you. Define prejudice when you finish. I believe you'll be ready, after that, to write an essay on whatever subject you select.

The response acknowledges the writer's realization of the subject and her readiness to undertake revision. Emphasis is placed on involving the writer in a further definition of her subject.

2

Everywhere you look today you see pollution: lakes are fouled with debris, garbage piles up in city gutters, and the air is yellowish around the edges of metropolitan areas. The energy crisis is a problem, yes, but our number one problem is pollution.

One way to solve this problem is to crack down on industry. The big factories I pass every morning on my way to town must be inspected and proper pollution fighting equipment be installed and maintained when necessary. If they won't comply, then their products should be boycotted.

Other solutions are for everyone to drive less and purchase fewer products. American drive more miles per day per person than any other people, and it's the exhaust that causes smog in Los Angeles, Chicago, and New York. Americans also purchase a great many products every year, from minor appliances such as blenders and electric can openers to major goods, such as cars, boats, and home furnishings. Less demand for such products would mean less production, and, in turn, pollution would decrease.

We've all got to fight our number one problem: pollution. Only if everyone acts can the problem be solved. The time has come to act before it's too late.

The essay is organized, but superficial. It reflects a more able writer than the first one, but he is simply going through the motions in order to pass a disliked class. He acts as if nothing has been done to reduce pollution and offers pie-in-

the-sky "solutions" without connecting them to reality. (For example, he assumes Americans can reduce their spending on products as easily as he writes the sentence in which the idea appears. Nor is consideration shown to injurious effects reduced purchasing might create.) The end response follows:

> While I've carefully read your discussion of solutions, I'm not convinced by them. Can the problem be <u>solved</u> once and for all? (And is this the right word?) My senses tell me there are no easy ways to eliminate pollution, especially <u>all</u> forms of it. And aren't factories you note already reducing smoke pollutants? Aren't Americans driving less and using less gas at present? I'm also troubled by your statement that pollution is our number one problem <u>today</u>. I'd like to hear more why you believe it is.
>
> If you want to present your views more effectively, I suggest both balance and focus, as well as a fresh way -your own way - of talking about the subject. The essay strikes me as pre-packaged - one that skims the surface of a number of current issues. It doesn't reflect to me much caring.
>
> One way of reseeing the subject might be to describe a place that is special to you and is showing evidence of some form of pollution. What are the effects? How is the place coping? What does the future hold for it? What effects does such change have on you? Perhaps a way of seeing this subject will appear afterwards.

The end comment pays special attention to <u>how</u> the writer expresses himself. Initial acknowledgment of what was written is subordinated to recognition of the paper having been read. In addition, the writer's seeming indifference is identified, and he is encouraged to see beyond the hollowness of his comments. Because of ability, the responsibility of revision is left more directly with this writer than with the preceding one. The response reflects confidence that the writer can improve the paper.

Effective responses require time to compose. They aren't found on the inside covers of handbooks and manuals, but re-

quire individualizing to fit the needs of a variety of students in our classes. Granted, at times student-teacher conferences may be the most effective way of responding to a writer, and often, students need each others' responses more than our own. Yet there are times conferences are not possible (i.e., the student with greatest need is absent each time conferences are scheduled) and occasions a teacher's response is vital. While these principles won't reduce the time and effort required to respond effectively, responses informed by the principles can motivate writers to their best efforts and demonstrate to students the very kind of communicative effectiveness our courses set out to teach.

Notes

[1] As quoted in Donald Murray, A Writer Teaches Writing (Boston: Houghton Mifflin,1968), p. 234.

[2] These principles reflect reading and synthesis of such texts as Alton Barbour and Alvin A. Goldberg, Interpersonal Communication (Urbana: ERIC,1974) ; Interpersonal Dynamics, ed. Warren G. Bennis et al. (Homewood,IL: The Dorsey Press,1964) ; Messages, ed. Jean M. Civikly (New York: Random House, 1974) ; and Carl R. Rogers, On Becoming a Person (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1961).

[3] Richard E. Young, Alton L. Becker, and Kenneth L. Pike, Rhetoric: Discovery and Change (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1970), p. 208.

[4] Barbour and Goldberg, p. 29.

[5] Larry A. Samovar and Edward D. Rintye,"Interpersonal Communication: Some Working Principles," in Messages, p. 139.

[6] Barbour and Goldberg, p. 35.